

February 27, 2025

Chairman Mike Thompson and Honorable Members of the Senate Federal & State Affairs Committee

I am Melinda Lewis, a lifelong Kansas citizen, a voter, a mother, and a professional educator. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in opposition to SB254.

Over the last 21 years, through my work as a policy advocate and community volunteer, I have had the distinct honor and great joy of knowing and collaborating with hundreds of incredibly talented immigrant youth. I have been inspired by their dedication to their educational attainment and their gratitude for the opportunity to study. They are impressive as a group and magnificent as individual adolescents. I remember a student who was still mastering English in middle school and had to translate her homework from English to Spanish, complete it, and then translate it back to English. She graduated high school third in her class and ultimately became a U.S. citizen and a licensed architect. These are the kinds of extraordinary young people Kansas' instate tuition policy gives the opportunity to **pay full instate tuition prices for the chance to attend our colleges and universities**. Our institutions, our workforce, and our state are enriched by their accomplishments; their achievements against many odds are a credit to their communities and an asset to our state.

Kansas was the sixth state to pass an instate tuition policy for qualified immigrant students, in 2004. By 2024, 25 states had such policies, many of which also include eligibility for state grants/loans. Partly because Kansas' policy allows only U.S. citizens and LPRs to receive public financial aid, relatively few immigrant students enroll in postsecondary education here—only about 9000 over the past 20 years (~75% of whom attended community colleges). When we first worked to pass our instate tuition policy in 2004, we *anticipated* positive outcomes, based on other states' experiences and the promise immigrant students had demonstrated in high school. Now, these students' successes offer resounding evidence that it works:

- Undocumented students become U.S. citizen students. Our immigration process is expensive, complicated, slow, and often unfair—I remember a student who became undocumented only because he turned 21 while still waiting for approval of his mother's application on his behalf (thereby making him ineligible for the visa)—but it is not an entirely closed door. Many of the students forever imprinted on my heart are now U.S. citizens, and thanks to Kansas policymakers' foresight, they are *college-educated* citizens—the teachers, nonprofit leaders, attorneys, and nurses we need.
- Immigrant students contribute positively to our institutions. The immigrant students in my own classes exceed expectations, bringing academic diligence and personal wisdom to their studies. SB254 unfairly and inaccurately defines 'public benefit' to

include paying full tuition, but universities benefit from the tuition dollars immigrant students pay. Kansas citizen students, many of whom benefit from state, federal, and institutional subsidies, recognize that paying full price out of pocket is not a public benefit.

- Immigrant students' degrees mean they pay more in taxes, amplifying their positive economic impact. Particularly important in the parts of Kansas contending with the loss of highly educated young people, immigrant students graduating from our postsecondary institutions are mostly still Kansans. This is the state that gave them an opportunity to turn their aspirations into successes, and they see a future for themselves in the place they call home. That's exactly the kind of win-win that education makes possible—and that we need.

In every corner of Kansas today—in Garden City, Hutchinson, Overland Park, Wichita, Kansas City, Liberal, and right here in Topeka—there are students just as exceptional as those who approached me decades ago to confide that they were undocumented and hoping there might be some way for their dreams of education to come true. Today, immigrant students in Kansas are preparing to graduate from high school and committed to equipping themselves to be the employees, community members, and eventual citizens our future demands. I hope the committee will vote against SB254. Immigrant students have demonstrated that giving them a chance to realize their ambitions is good for Kansas. It was true then and is true still today. Thank you for your consideration, and for your service to Kansas.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Melinda K. Lewis".

Melinda Lewis

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